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Photo courtesy Battelle

Jeff Hammonds

CLOSETED DISCOVERERS: LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER SCIENTISTS

By Jacqueline Ruttimann Oberst
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Think "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" applies only to the military? This too happens in the sciences, at all levels, from academia and industry to professional societies. Below are some of the ways that lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender scientists conceal part of their identity and the resources that this

"LGBT scientists should be recognized as excellent employees not as having sexual cultural issues."

—Jeff Hammonds

"invisible" army uses to thrive. **By Jacqueline Ruttimann Oberst**

For many years, **Juan** (not his real name) led a double life. Many of his college friends knew his secret, but few did at the company where he was doing his internship. At office functions, he had to employ acts of subterfuge so as to not be found out. Juan is a gay male.

"I'm 28 now, and everyone's expecting a wife or a girlfriend," he says. "If I bring my boyfriend along, I will say to him 'by the way, this is important' and then he knows that we are to be 'friends.'"

At the same company's Christmas party he brought along a female professor. His boss got drunk at the party and started congratulating him for dating her.

"I couldn't correct him, because he's my boss," he recalls.

After this incident, Juan started coming out to his company's colleagues. Then his internship abruptly ended. "They said, 'sorry we're out of work,'" he states. "I was like, 'wow after a year and eight months you suddenly run out of work?'"

Juan's story is similar to that of many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) scientists. Many feel they must keep their



Neena B. Schwartz

Neena B. Schwartz



R. Diamond

Rochelle Diamond

cover to escape overt and covert discrimination. These issues are being increasingly talked about and exposed, like at the upcoming Out to Innovate Career Summit on October 9 held by the National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals (NOGLSTP).

Yet LGBT rights have come a long way. In a chapter of her book titled, "A Lab of My Own," **Neena B. Schwartz**, a retired neuroendocrinologist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, chronicles what it was like for her to start a research lab in the 1970s as both a woman and a lesbian. "While my feminist activism has at times seemed separate from my science, it, like my career, has been played out in the open. My lesbianism, however, has always been hidden, even when others acknowledged it."

Perhaps we see less of the blatant homophobia than Dr. Schwartz experienced, but heterosexim, or the assumption that all people live in a heterosexual world, still prevails. "Faggot" has been replaced by the remark "that's so gay" to disparage people, things, or ideas

that fall outside what is considered the heterosexual "norm." Benefits given to heterosexual married couples, such as healthcare, adoption, immigrant sponsorship, and hospital rights are still denied to most same-sex couples in the United States. However, the recent court battles over the U.S. Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which only recognizes matrimony between one man and one woman; Proposition 8, which banned same sex marriages in California; and the legalization of same sex marriages in other states and Washington, D.C., shows that culturally a debate is happening.

"The issues aren't going to go away. Proposition 8 has bubbled all this to the surface such that it has become a water cooler discussion in many workplaces. In such situations, people are forced to out themselves or walk away depending on people's points of view," declares **Rochelle Diamond**, the chair of NOGLSTP and a professional staff member at the California Institute of Technology's Division of Biology, "You don't know where people stand until issues become public."

Closeted LGBT scientists employ multiple strategies to avoid workplace harassment and bigotry, including covering, passing/compartamentalizing, and overachieving. This article will explore three dimensions in the professional lives of young LGBT scientists—mentoring, being a minority within a minority, and playing the role of leader versus activist—and how they are addressed in academia, industry, and professional societies.

WORKING INCOGNITO

"We are a minority; unless we are known, we are invisible," explains **Amy A. Ross**, Ph.D., an associate biologist at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

In their article titled "Navigating the Heteronormativity of Engineering: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students," (forthcoming in the journal *Engineering Studies*), sociology doctoral students at the University of California, San Diego, **Erin Cech** and **Tom Waidzunus**, conducted interviews and focus groups with LGB engineering students. The students reported employing three strategies to avoid harassment: covering, in which they might be out to their peers but never bring their sexual orientation up in conversation; passing/compartmentalizing, where they pose as heterosexual and keep their work and social lives separate; and overachieving, where they amass so much knowledge and expertise that they make themselves indispensable.



Courtesy of Amy A. Ross

Amy A. Ross



Erin Cech

These strategies require tremendous amounts of energy and place additional emotional and mental strain on the students, often resulting in academic and social isolation, making “engineering school a hostile place for many LGB identifying students,” according to Cech.

In their study, Cech and Waidzunas found the discrimination experienced by LGBT students is also much nuanced. Social stereotypes crept in such as the perception that gay men are more feminine than straight men and lesbian women are more masculine than straight women. Additionally, “feminine” engineers—straight women and gay men alike—are stereotyped as less competent than “masculine”—straight men and gay women—engineers. The researchers also found that levels of tolerance differed in the various engineering subfields: biological and chemical engineering were perceived as the most tolerant while mechanical, aerospace, and civil engineering were perceived as the least.

MENTORING AS A MISSION

Finding a mentor responsive to the needs of an LGBT scientist may once have seemed an impossible mission—now as then, it is just a matter of knowing where to look.

Over the past five years NOGLSTP has partnered with MentorNet, a non-profit mentoring organization with the purpose of furthering the progress of underrepresented minorities in scientific and technical fields. Diamond and Ross especially recommend this service for LGBT scientists in socially conservative education institutions or regions.

Students who are bisexual or transgender may feel a greater need than gay or straight students for mentoring since this group is the smallest represented and the least tolerated, according to Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) executive director Eliza Byard.

“The role of a mentor and an advisor for all LGBT students is undeniably critical to the beginning of an academic or scientific career,” says Byard. Nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT K-12 students encounter harassment at school, according to the GLSEN 2007 National School Climate Survey. Those who are most threatened achieve lower grade point averages and are twice as likely either not to finish high school or go on to college.

Ben Barres, a neurobiologist at Stanford University who transitioned from a female to a male, serves as mentor for some LGBT students.

“Many students are still in the closet,” he says. “Whenever I speak I always mention that I am gay, and in every case I am contacted by students applying for research positions and internships who ask if they should be open in the application process about who they are. I always advise them to be, and none have reported any adverse consequences.”

In Barres’ opinion, women who transition to men have an easier time in the sciences than men who transition to women because transgender women take on the same incompetency stereotype as heterosexual women; they are either not taken seriously or are talked over by male colleagues.



Thomas von Foerster and Julie Schell



Darrin Wilstead, Mentoring & Alumni Program Director, Point Foundation

Darrin Wilstead

Because everyone’s experience is different, finding a perfectly matched mentor can be challenging.

“Going through high school and college, people need someone who’s older and been there before. A mentor is supposed to be not just a teacher but also an older guide to career, life, and whatever,” says **Thomas von Foerster**, a retired science publisher who is one among the many mentors at the Point Foundation, a national nonprofit organization that provides mentoring, scholarships, and leadership training for LGBT students in the humanities and sciences.

There are just as many types of mentors as there are needs for them.

“There’s no one-size fits all when it comes to mentoring,” notes **Darrin Wilstead**, director of Mentoring and Leadership Programs at the Point Foundation. “Some scholars need caring and nurturing because of lack of emotional or financial support from family. Others need someone to help them network.”

Katie Fife, a Point Scholar and undergraduate neurobiology student at the University of Texas at Austin, uses the foundation for both. “I can call up anyone at the Point Foundation at any time, in any city, when in need of somewhere to stay or advice or support for any community service project I am working on,” she says.

ALLIES FROM WITHIN: ACADEMIA AND INDUSTRY

Academia and industry are also starting to fall in line in terms of providing mentors for LGBT scientists.

“A lot of academics used to have the attitude of ‘what does this have to do with anything?’ and don’t see it as germane,” says Ross. “Now they increasingly do. We’re at the same place with sexual orientation and gender that we were with race/ethnic diversity 25 years ago. It’s the same fight but with different people. In contrast, industry has led the way while academics have fallen behind, providing strong LGBT programs, affinity resource groups, recruitment, and heavy support of ‘Out and Equal’ employee resource groups.”

Julie Schell, a science education scholar at Harvard, has found that academic mentors don’t have to have the same sexual orientation to be effective. “At Columbia where I did my doctoral work, I originally chose an LGBT advisor. I assumed by proxy that just because she was gay we would be a good match. It wasn’t the case,” she recalls. Now a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences at Harvard, her mentor is her (heterosexual) boss, laser physicist **Eric Mazur**. “He creates an environment where I feel comfortable being out. I have never experienced a bit of heterosexism or homophobia from him at all. He refers to my wife as my wife,” she says, adding that Mazur provided her with health insurance, something her postdoctoral contract did not originally cover, when she told him that her wife’s workplace was deducting more than \$300.00 additional per month in taxes to cover Julie’s benefits. (Under the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, same-sex couples are not eligible for a federal tax credit



Katie Fife, Junior at the University of Texas at Austin

Katie Fife



Photo by Nancy Paradiso

Barbara Belmont

on health insurance and are thus taxed for the benefit, even if a workplace happens to be required by state law to provide it for same-sex couples.)

"LGBT scientists should be recognized as excellent employees not as having sexual cultural issues," says **Jeff Hammonds**, diversity coordinator at Battelle Memorial Institute, an international enterprise that develops and commercializes technology and manages governmental and industrial laboratories. He notes that the driving culture at Battelle is to be more inclusive. The company has an employee resource group called PRISM and an LGBT awareness month in June in which friends and family can come and see where their partners and friends work.

MINORITY WITHIN A MINORITY

There are distinctions within the LGBT community that are even more granular—individuals who are both LGBT and members of a racial or ethnic minority group.

Diamond notes that the discrimination can be doubled in many aspects. "It's usually easy to tell if a person is black, but it isn't as easy to tell if a person is gay. Although one cannot hide their race, one can hide one's sexual orientation. Many LGBT minorities apply for jobs and positions where they may not necessarily want to come out because it may jeopardize them from advancing or getting the position," she says.

Additionally, Ross explains that young Hispanic males or young African American females have prejudice within their own communities via the social stereotypes of a "macho" Hispanic man and a "strong" African American female.

Role models for these scientists can be hard to come by. Schwartz, at a book signing in Milwaukee, was approached by many female undergraduates, especially Hispanic and Asian students. "I think they found it easier to talk to me because they found a minority within a minority—I'm a woman who's also a lesbian," she says.

Although the sample size was small in her study, Erin Cech says she found that "an additional axis of being a minority makes it more difficult to find a connection among their peers. As such, most related more to the racial/ethnic group than their sexual identity."

LEADERSHIP VS. ACTIVISM—MISSIONS IMPOSSIBLE?

Being an LGBT scientist and an activist pose certain risks.

"In the scientific community, it's frowned upon to be an activist," says Diamond. "When seeking tenure, one needs to be apolitical. When seeking grants, one never knows who's reviewing them."

Many groups are trying to emphasize that one does not have to be an LGBT activist to be an LGBT leader.

"One can also lead the cause by being your whole self at work," explains Diamond, who suggests talking about your weekend at work if it involved your partner or hanging an LGBT "Safe Zone" sticker on the office door.

Barres feels that this approach is "just semantics" and that LGBT scientists should be both.

"It's not OK to be silent, to say you're not an activist. The leaders' responsibility is to be an activist. It's not acceptable to be silent about these issues because so many people depend on them to set an example," he says.

Barres has been true to his words. One of the battles he's fought included encouraging the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to open their investigator application process so that more minority scientists could be included. Previously the competition required nominations from universities, and those suggested typically making the nominations and being nominated were predominately white males.

Leadership and activism has also been seen on the professional society front. **Barbara Belmont** has recently been appointed chair for the American Chemistry Society's (ACS) newly created Subdivision for Gay and Transgender Chemists and Allies.

"It was a long road to get here," says Belmont. In the 1990s, gay chemists were meeting on an ad hoc basis at national ACS meetings, trying to get their gatherings published in the ACS meeting program in *C&E News*. This effort was met with official silence, an action Belmont interprets as "code for 'it's making me uncomfortable that you're telling everyone that you're queer.'" Eventually, LGBT chemists captured the attention of several ACS presidents with strong commitment to LGBT inclusion in their diversity outreach efforts. These ACS allies have sponsored a reception for LGBT Chemists and Allies since 2008. Belmont is excited about the new subdivision, which gives LGBT chemists a formal "home" within ACS, as well as creating opportunities to educate the Society about LGBT workplace issues through national meeting programming.

Other associations have longer track records with LGBT scientists. NOGLSTP has had a long positive relationship with The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS; the publisher of *Science*). The AAAS Council issued a resolution against the discrimination of sexual minorities in 1975. In 1994, NOGLSTP was officially recognized as an AAAS Affiliate. Since then, NOGLSTP has had a presence at the AAAS Annual Meetings, sponsoring symposia and receptions for LGBT scientists and allies.

Despite allies from academia, industry, and professional societies many LGBT scientists still remain unknown.

"Unless we are known, we are invisible and we don't want to be invisible," says Ross. "When people see you and know you that does more to break down barriers."

Jacqueline Ruttimann Oberst is a freelance writer living in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

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Suggested Web Links

National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals' (NOGLSTP) Out to Innovate Conference -
www.noglstp.net/outtoinnovate

Out and Equal Workplace Summit - <http://outandequal.org/annual-summit>

Mentornet - www.mentornet.net

Point Foundation - www.pointfoundation.org

Battelle - www.battelle.org

American Chemical Society, Division of Professional Relations - <http://prof.sites.acs.org/lgbtandallies.htm>.

AAAS - www.AAAS.org

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) - www.glsen.org

Out in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics - www.ostem.org

MySciNet: An Inclusive Community - <http://community.sciencecareers.org/myscinet>

Lynn Conway Home Page, (database and resource for transgendered persons) - ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/conway.html

Triangle Area Gay Scientists - tags.zuberfowler.com

Tribe – a social networking forum for gay, lesbian, bi, trans, intersex, queer, and friendly heterosexual allies in the sciences and technical professions - tribes.tribe.net/glbtscientists

Transgender at Work Resource Page - www.tgender.net/taw

American Mathematical Society (AMS) - www.ams.org

Federal GLOBE - Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Employees of the Federal Government - www.fedglobe.org

Out and Equal Workplace Advocates - www.outandequal.org

Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) - www.sacnas.org

Society of Women Engineers (SWE) - societyofwomenengineers.swe.org

Featured Participants

American Association for the Advancement of Science - www.aaas.org

American Chemistry Society - portal.acs.org

Battelle Memorial Institute - www.battelle.org

California Institute of Technology - www.caltech.edu

Columbia University - www.columbia.edu

Harvard - www.harvard.edu

Howard Hughes Medical Institute - www.hhmi.org

MentorNet - www.mentornet.net

National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals - www.noglstp.org

Northwestern University - www.northwestern.edu

Point Foundation - www.thepointfoundation.org

Stanford University - www.stanford.edu

University of California, San Diego - www.ucsd.edu

University of Texas at Austin - www.utexas.edu

Upcoming Features

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